

Preliminary Proposal

to the Schenectady

Arts Center Theatre

Installation of a Theatre Pipe Organ

Proctor's Theatre, State Street, Schenectady, NY

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May 20, 1978

BACKGROUND

The theatre pipe organ was once an integral part of almost every theatre. It provided background music during intermissions, brief concertizing, and of course appropriate mood music and sound effects for the silent films of the past. Vaudeville shows, stage productions, and also radio programs used the organ for accompaniment. Larger and grander film theatres were built as the popularity of films increased. Of course each theatre had its own theatre pipe organ. The pinnacle of the great movie palaces occurred in the mid to late nineteen twenties. By the time of the late twenties some of the largest theatre pipe organ installations exceeded 36 ranks of pipes and included a broad range of percussion instruments and special effects all playable from the organ console.

The theatre organ differs significantly from the conventional church organ in that the theatre organ is designed to play primarily orchestral music. The tone colors chosen emphasize the orchestral tone colors such as strings, flutes, brass and woodwinds, thus music consisting of a melody with accompaniment can be played by one person in a very flexible manner.

The successful introduction of the "talkies" in 1929 signalled the decline of the great motion picture houses. Later the success of radio and television as entertainment mediums hastened this process. During the nineteen forties and fifties many theatres finally closed being unable to support normal operating expenses. The demolition or alternation of the one-time prosperous picture palaces saw a great many theatre organs reduced to rubble under the wreckers ball.

The nineteen fifties saw an increase in interest in saving, restoring, and fostering appreciation of the theatre

organ. This movement has seen rapid growth, and today there are several groups actively devoted to the preservation and enjoyment of the theatre organ, the largest of which is the American Theatre Organ Society (ATOS) with a membership of approximately 6500 and 56 active chapters.

Present Use of the Theatre Organ

Of the thousands of theatre organs produced by such companies as Wurlitzer, Robert Morton, Kimball, and Marr and Colton, to name only a few manufacturers, only a few hundred are presently installed in public buildings throughout the country. A great many more are now in home installations and quite a number have been removed from theatres and are currently in storage due to lack of proper facilities. As a matter of fact, there are several home installations and instruments in storage within the capital district area.

There are two major types of public locations at which theatre organs are presently in use. Renovated theatres, concert halls, and auditoriums are homes for some fine restored instruments. Notable examples in the immediate area include Thomaston Opera House, Thomaston, Conn.; New York Military Academy, Cornwall, NY; and Proctor's High School auditorium, Utica, NY. With the exception of the installation at New York Military Academy, these organs were originally installed in theatres and since relocated. The second and rather unique use of theatre organs is in nite clubs and restaurants. Fully half of the organs in public locations are in pizza chain restaurants. This is a relatively recent phenomena which began in the west coast area and is now spreading eastward to the midwest and southern states. There are such restaurants planned and under construction in the east coast region. There has been a tremendous upsurge in popularity of this form of regular

entertainment and many of the top name artists have become resident organists.

Some instruments which are in operating theatres, until recently a notable example being Radio City Music Hall, are used on a regular daily basis. However, most of the concert halls and auditoriums which contain theatre organs find regular occasional use in concert series. The concerts often include, in addition to the musical numbers, sing-alongs and accompaniment of silent films. Such programs compliment other artistic presentations and help to focus public attention towards the building and the community. Most of the well known organists tour on a regular basis, and would welcome the chance to add to their schedule performing on a properly maintained instrument in a good acoustical environment.

Considerations Involved with Installation

The basic factors to consider in any installation effort are matching the instrument to the physical and acoustical dimensions of the building, and selecting an instrument in reasonable condition. Because of the variety of types of buildings the following discussion will be limited to theatre installations. In a sense this can make the job somewhat easier since most theatres originally had theatre organs installed. Some idea of the size of the instrument necessary is possible knowing the size of the original installation. This is a far from foolproof method as a great many original installations were far from perfect, with instruments too small or in acoustically imperfect locations.

Before continuing further it should be mentioned how the theatre organ size is denoted. An instrument may be described as a 4/24, for example. The first number (4)

refers to the number of manuals or keyboards in the console. The second number (24) refers to the number of ranks of pipes, each rank being a unique tone color such as trumpet, flute, strings, or tibia, to name a few. In addition to the pipes, a theatre organ of the size mentioned above may have thirty or more percussions and special effects such as bass drum, snare drum, cymbal, xylophone and fire whistle to name but a few. The number of manuals really has no relation to the acoustical power of the instrument and primarily affects flexibility in performance. For a certain size theatre, as determined not only by the number of seats but by the total volume, many subjective factors determine the best size and disposition of the instrument. Placement of the organ chambers and voicing (adjustment of the balance between tone and volume) of the pipework are only two of many factors affecting the interaction in the total acoustic environment.

After deciding how many ranks of pipes seems appropriate relative to the size of the theatre, one has to live with the constraint of the physical space available in the organ chambers. The chambers are typically placed above the stage on one or both sides of the proscenium arch speaking into the theatre through grilles. In many theatres they were drawn into the plans by architects having no conception of organ design and were not of optimum size or construction. Chambers that were too small or those with the only entrances 100 feet up a sheer wall were some of the things with which organ installation crews had to contend. It can safely be said that there was no such thing as a standard or typical installation. Even though manufacturers produced standard models, when they were finally shipped and installed, each instrument was tailored to fit the available space. More often than not this meant contending with a

chamber which was too small. One installer has said that his most useful tool was a good ten pound hammer!

The specific question, however, concerns the installation of an instrument in the Schenectady Proctor's Theatre. The first step in the evaluation involved an inspection of the theatre. The two attached sheets detail the left and right side chambers, respectively (as determined facing the stage, which is shown on the diagrams). These diagrams are not exactly to scale and were made from notes taken during a tour of the theatre. The position where the organ console was originally installed is shown on the drawing in sheet 1 at the left side of the orchestra pit, and there originally was no console lift. A cable duct exits to the left and a windline to supply the console is intact and exits to the right. The blower room is in the basement directly under the location indicated on the drawing in sheet 2. An inspection of the theatre (with the exception of a room under the balcony seats to which we did not have access, called the organ room) showed that all of the equipment has been removed.

All that the authors know of the original instrument at the present time is that it was a three manual Wurlitzer. We expect to learn a great deal more about the original installation since Wurlitzer Company published a catalog of all their instruments which has been re-published due to the efforts of theatre organ enthusiasts. Any information which has been already cataloged by the A.C.T. would be of interest. Examining the floor planking where the organ pipe chests were originally placed, considering the size of the windlines, and looking at some of the cabling which was left behind when the instrument was removed, it appears that it was not of great size. Perhaps a maximum of 13 ranks of pipes were involved in the final installation. The chambers

are of sufficient size in length and width to handle a somewhat larger instrument.

One of the distinct advantages in a re-installation effort is the easy access to the chambers directly from the outside, through steel fire doors. Hoist beams are part of this construction so chests, pipes and other parts can be raised and set into place without having to be brought in through the theatre proper. The openings on either side for the swell shades (used to regulate the volume for musical expression) are hidden from audience view by several layers of decoratively draped heavy felt. This material is very heavy and so completely covers the openings, acting as a very effective sound deadening material, that fully one-half of the sound would be absorbed before it reached the theatre. Any re-installation would necessarily involve replacement of this cloth by lighter and more acoustically transparent material which would look the same but not damp out the sound.

A consideration which will affect the selection and installation of an instrument is the height of the organ chambers. This dimension was not determined exactly but appeared to be only about twelve feet. The bottom octave of some of the pedal pipes can be sixteen feet long (even thirty two feet in some larger instruments). Normally, all the pipework is oriented vertically which would require more headroom than might seem to be available. This factor was overcome in many cases by designing the pipework to be folded over or "mitered" to fit the available space. It is possible by appropriate selection or modification of the pipework to live within this constraint, so the chamber height should not be of overriding concern.

Maintenance of the Organ

The maintenance of the organ once it has been installed is a necessary and continuing task. Much of the support in maintenance typically comes from local and regional ATOS chapters, and very often interested volunteers are the nucleus for forming a new ATOS chapter where one previously did not exist. As of the present time there is not an ATOS chapter in the capital district but there are a group of enthusiasts interested in theatre organs. The formation of a chapter usually depends on having access to at least one local instrument as a focal point for developing interest.

A very important point to consider regarding the maintenance of any installation is the structural integrity of the theatre. Large climatic changes and damp and dirty environments are detrimental to maintenance, and even the continued operation of the organ. In addition to the proper environment, regular use of the instrument is beneficial, so it is of advantage to have easy access and encourage its being played.

Considerations in Selection and Installation

At this point I think we can define several options which can be considered in light of how they might interface with other plans for use of the theatre. It seems that regardless of the option chosen, an instrument of three or four manuals and about fifteen ranks of pipes is a reasonable size for the theatre. Fixing the size of the instrument leaves the major difference in the cost and time involved in acquisition and installation. The various options are listed in order of suggested consideration.

Option I

Locate an instrument that is in good shape but in need of rebuilding, hopefully in the capital district region, and have the necessary rebuilding and installation directed by a local organ builder with the help of a volunteer work force. This is probably the most cost effective in terms of initial investment and total installation time. The exact cost would be difficult to estimate as it depends on the amount of volunteer time which might be available relative to the desired installation time.

Option II

Purchase of a completely rebuilt instrument. Several of the organ supply companies are currently in this business and some fine reconditioned organs are currently on the market. The initial investment exclusive of installation could be in the range of fifteen to twenty five thousand dollars. If time were a factor this is perhaps the quickest alternative. Some flexibility is lost in this option due to the fact that any modifications which might be necessary, and perhaps done as a part of rebuilding, would have to be done anyway during installation.

Option III

Purchase an instrument that is presently installed in a theatre or in storage, in "as is" condition. This is potentially the cheapest alternative and investment of anywhere from a nominal sum to perhaps a few thousand dollars would bound the price range. A great deal of labor would be involved in this alternative, as probably most of the instrument would require rebuilding.

Cost of necessary replacement parts could be as large as the initial purchase price. The total time involved in this effort would likely be large.

Option IV

To be complete, it should be mentioned that there are several companies that will build a new instrument to any specification. Costs here meet or exceed original purchase prices of older instruments. Approximately five thousand dollars per rank of pipes is a reasonable figure to use for estimation. This is without doubt the most costly option, and is not the shortest in time frame since everything must be custom built.

Benefits

The ways in which the addition of a theatre organ to Proctor's Theatre will benefit not only the theatre but the downtown area, can be enumerated as follows:

1. The most obvious benefit is in developing a regular concert series, using local and top name artists. With the proper publicity these events can be very profitable. The assistance of ATOS primarily in the area of local and regional publicity can be helpful.
2. To serve as a focal point for developing a community awareness and interest in utilizing the theatre.
3. Concerts and other programs in the theatre will be drawing people to the downtown area. Schenectady would be unique in having this entertainment medium. There are relatively few instruments in this area (the nearest at least a two hour drive at present) and this instal-

lation would be even more unique in that it is a theatre installation.

4. The organ once was used regularly as accompaniment for live shows. Operas, stage productions and plays (both community and high school) could use the instrument to advantage. Consider the successful touring vaudeville show which has annually played at the Proctor's theatre in Troy. With such a show playing at Proctor's theatre here in Schenectady, the organ would serve to enhance and compliment the stage acts.
5. Showings of silent films, both comedy shorts and feature length, with organ accompaniment have been demonstrated to be consistently good in generating interest and attendance. These films have been scheduled as a part of regular concert series, or in some cases as the major attraction for a monthly or even weekly matinee.

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